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Life Before Legal Status: The Experiences of Undocumented Immigrants

LA TOYA STAINE CARRIKER

LaToya is originally from Belize, Central America. Funded by an ATP grant, LaToya conducted this research on immigration under the mentorship of Dr. Lucinda King-Frode and Dr. Rebecca Leavitt, and presented it in April 2007 at the National Conference for Undergraduate Research and ATP Undergraduate Research Symposium. LaToya hopes that through the research she has conducted, people will have better clarity and understanding of immigrants' lives and will thus be inspired to effect policy changes.

Introduction

This research is a qualitative study to learn of the experiences undocumented immigrants have while living in the United States. I first became interested in this research after relocating to the U.S. three years ago. Although I was never undocumented, I encountered many challenges that exist when a person leaves a familiar country. According to Hutchison (2003), migrating to a new country is usually considered a major life event and turning point in the life of the immigrant. I often describe it as relocating to a new world. A person has to teach herself how to do menial tasks in the new environment. I then started questioning how much more challenging immigration would be for a person who is undocumented. As a social work student, I also questioned how people in helping professions address these challenges. Asking these questions eventually led to my research questions:

What experiences undocumented immigrants have had in securing resources to meet their basic needs and those of their families. Specifically,

- a. What basic resources undocumented immigrants most often obtain?
- b. Where and how are undocumented immigrants able to secure certain resources?
- c. How did prospective helpers help, or not?

What is the affective response and coping mechanisms that undocumented immigrants experience as a result of this process?

Research Background

Undocumented immigrants are often referred to as illegal or undocumented aliens or immigrants. For the purpose of this research, undocumented immigrants are described as persons who are unlawfully residing in the US. According to the Department of Homeland Security (2001), approximately 5.0 million undocumented immigrants resided in the US as of October, 1996. In 2004, the Center for Immigration Studies reported that the total number of undocumented immigrants in the U.S. may be as high as ten million (Becker, 2006).

Because undocumented immigrants continue to arrive in the U.S. in large numbers, U.S. government policies continue to focus on reducing and preventing illegal immigration. For example, the main purpose of the

Immigration Reform and Control Act in 1986 was to restrict large numbers of undocumented immigrants from entering the US by “sanction[ing] employers for hiring undocumented workers” (Williams, 2004, p. 11). The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act and the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigration Responsibility Act are designed to dissuade immigrants from residing in the US by curtailing public assistance to immigrants (Fragomen, 1996). Another way the US government has tried to reduce illegal immigration is through border patrol at the U.S.-Mexican border. Illegally crossing the U.S.-Mexican border has proven detrimental and even fatal to many immigrants. Entering the U.S. at the Mexico/U.S. border usually means enduring extreme temperatures. Many undocumented border-crossers have died from severe weather conditions and heat stroke (Nagengast, 1998).

Along with official policies which aim to prevent illegal immigration, public intolerance of undocumented immigrants is still widely present. Many people have strong negative feelings about immigrants- especially undocumented immigrants. Proposition 187 in California in 1994, for instance, is a reflection of public reaction to undocumented immigrants. Residents of California voted for Proposition 187 which “deprives illegal immigrants of welfare benefits, education, and all but emergency medical care. It also requires that teachers, police officers, and welfare workers report any knowledge of illegal immigrants to the Office of Immigration and Naturalization Services for purposes of deportation” (Lee & Ottati, 2002, p. 618). Undocumented immigrants have also been forced to enter low paying, dangerous, and degrading jobs where they often receive little respect or protection. Despite such conditions, popular assumptions are that undocumented immigrants are a strain on the American economy and a threat to the American way of life (Williams, 2004).

Undocumented immigrants most often arrive and live in the US in inhumane and risky conditions. The aim of this research is to gain insight into the lives of undocumented immigrants living in the U.S. through interviews with former undocumented immigrants. In particular, the research focuses on the variety of experiences undocumented immigrants have had in securing resources to meet their basic needs and those of their families.

Methodology

Beginning in December 2006 the snowball sampling method was used in this research by asking personal contacts in school, work, and other social settings to share information on the research and the need for participants. After receiving the initial interest in participation, the investigator contacted the person to determine if the person was eligible for the research. Participation eligibility required a person to be twenty-one years

or older, a former undocumented immigrant, and a current resident of Massachusetts. If eligible, a time convenient to both the participant and the investigator was scheduled to conduct the interview. From January to March, 2007, interviews were conducted both in person and via telephone.

In a non-scheduled standardized method, both closed ended and open ended questions were asked. Some closed ended questions asked participants to share their demographics: age, race/ethnicity, and country of origin. Other closed ended questions asked participants to name which public assistance they have had or are currently receiving. Open ended questions asked participants to share different aspects of their experiences during the period they were undocumented. Because the interviews were conducted in a non-scheduled manner, some participants' explored certain topics more than others.

Sample

A total of eight participants from ages twenty-eight to fifty-eight years old were interviewed. Of the eight participants, two were males and six were females. Seven participants were undocumented while living in Massachusetts. The one other participant lived in New York during the period of undocumented status. Three participants were originally from Cape Verde, one from Angola, two from Ghana, one from Portugal, and one from Guyana. Participants have resided in the U.S. from seven to twenty-eight years but have attained legal status from three to twenty-six years. Although all participants spoke English, one participant requested a translator to better convey and understand messages. Figure 1 below provides background information on each participant.

Figure 1

Background information on participants.

Participant	Country of Origin	Age	Gender	Years residing in the US	Years with legal status
1	Ghana	35	M	7	5
2	Ghana	58	M	25	19
3	Guyana	46	F	28	26
4	Portugal	36	F	17	16
5	Cape Verde	31	F	17	7
6	Cape Verde	28	F	9	8
7	Cape Verde	30	F	12	3
8	Angola	56	F	10	9

Ethical Concerns

Because this research involves a possibly vulnerable population, ethical issues were thoroughly considered. Ensuring the privacy of the participants was essential since this research has the possibility of stigmatization. All information that could reveal a participant's identity was kept confidential. Also, to minimize harm to the participants, only persons who are now legal residents or citizens were asked to participate in the research.

Along with the above precautions, other measures were taken to ensure that the research was ethical. Participants, for instance, were asked to sign a letter of consent. Included in the letter of consent were the purposes of the research. Also, the informed consent included all possible risks known to the researcher, the benefits of participating in the research, and the contact information of the researcher. A research proposal was also submitted to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Bridgewater State College. The IRB ensured that the research met ethical standards, was well planned out and was worthwhile.

Results and Discussion

Source of Basic Survival Needs

As seen on Figure 2A on page 6, most participants relied largely on family, friends, and themselves to provide for housing, food, and income. Consistent with research by Chavez (1990), most participants co-resided as a means to thrive in their new environment. Some participants shared that co-residing not only brought financial assistance, but it also provided a means for emotional support. Unlike Chavez' research, however, a few participants noted that they had negative experiences co-residing. Some negative experiences shared were overcrowding, lack of privacy, and frequent tension or disagreements.

Except for medical assistance, this research shows that undocumented immigrants are less likely to use public assistance. These results are consistent with research by (UIC) Center for Urban Economic Development (2002). Their research found that although many undocumented immigrants have low or moderate incomes, they rarely relied on public assistance to support them. This research shows that they are much more likely to rely on family, friends, and themselves.

Figure 2A

Source of Basic Needs

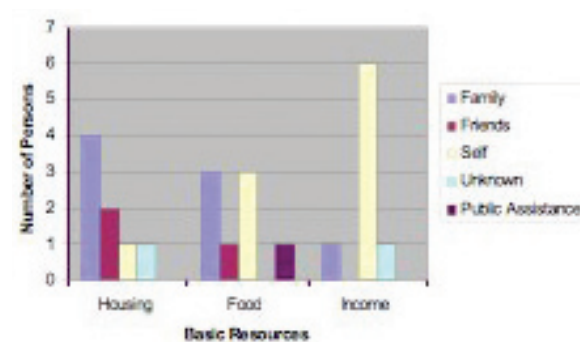
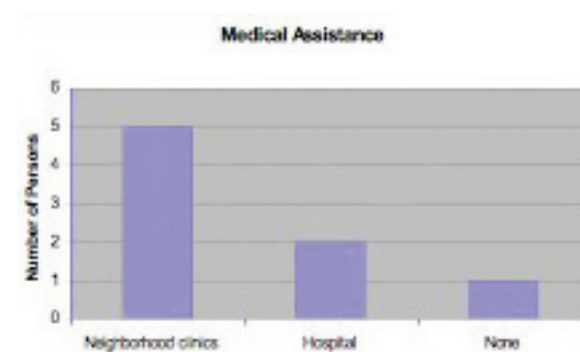


Figure 2B

Source of Medical Assistance



Affective Responses

Most participants disclosed having negative feelings during the period of undocumented status. When asked to list some descriptions of how they generally felt while undocumented, some common terms used were: lonely, disappointed, frustrated, angry, and sad. Only one participant said that she was contented with her situation. This person, however, also noted she came to the U.S. when she was sixteen years old and was cared for by an aunt. She got married the following year and thus became a legal citizen. Her period of undocumented status then is relatively short compared to the other participants.

This same participant also noted that she was never afraid of deportation. Six of the other participants stated that they were afraid of being deported. A few participants said that they so much feared being deported that it affected their social life. They avoided large gatherings, banks, and airport. One other participant said that being deported "never crossed [his] mind."

When asked to list some of their major stressors, most participants responded that not having a social security number was one of their major stressors. They stated that without social security numbers, they could not get better jobs, further education, and health insurance. Other stressors mentioned were language barrier, strenuous work, and lack of stability in their lives.

Participants were also asked to state some negative incidences that stood out to them during the time they were undocumented. One participant mentioned that she endured verbal abuse and constant belittling by her employer. Another participant stated that she was once mocked by a police officer while she struggled to speak English. A participant shared that she entered a romantic relationship on the hope that she would get married and attain legal citizenship. She stated that during this relationship she endured verbal abuse and once physical abuse on the hopes that one day she would be legal. Other participants stated that most negative incidences were the unsafe working conditions at the factories and the unfair pay by some employers.

Because participants' seemed to have very negative experiences while they were undocumented, they were asked if there were times that they wanted to return to their countries of origin. Six of the eight participants said that they did want to return. They explained that they missed the cultural practices and the familiarity of their countries of origin. These six participants were then asked what prevented them from returning to their native countries. Some stated that it was difficult for them to provide for themselves and their families. Some also mentioned that they could not advance in their native countries. Four of these participants had come to the US as high school students with the hopes of attending colleges. One other participant stated that she came to the U.S. as a minor and even though she wanted to return, her mother would not allow her to. Of the two participants who stated that they did not want to return, one was the woman mentioned earlier who obtained her legal documents a year after immigrating to the U.S. The other participant stated that she came from Angola where there was a civil war. She explained that she preferred living with the difficulties as an undocumented immigrant than to have her family continue living in a country with war.

Interesting Findings

Some very interesting observations were made from this research. Most notably, even though seven of eight participants described their experiences as highly stressful, none were seen by a professional counselor, social worker, or therapist! Participants provided some insights as to why they never sought professional counseling. For example, one participant explained that in her country of origin, the cultural expectation is to keep personal struggles and difficulties private. Two other participants stated

that in their native countries, professions such as counseling, social work, or therapy are nonexistent. They stated that they simply did not know such services in the U.S. Hence, even though these participants had highly stressful experiences, they never considered seeking professional therapy.

Other interesting findings are the difficulty in recruiting and the high level of distrust some participants and potential participants displayed. Some persons frankly stated that they were skeptical of speaking to the investigator or other persons about their experiences during the period of undocumented status. For example, one person asked "are you setting me up?" Two persons also discussed the New Bedford Raid¹ which occurred during the time period participants were being recruited and interviewed. One of the two persons asked what were the interviewer's thoughts and view of the raid. Others displayed skepticism by asking personal questions of the investigator. Most questions sought information on her cultural background, her legal status, and her educational background. Other possible signs that participants were skeptical were unreturned phone calls, unanswered phone calls, and non-attendance at arranged meetings.

Another interesting finding is that most participants expressed feelings of accomplishment and entitlement. Many stated that they are now proud of overcoming the circumstances that they had experienced. As one participant stated, "I have been at the bottom of the bottoms, and now I feel like I have earned my right as a U.S. citizen." All participants also shared a desire to assist persons who are now undocumented. Many stated that they do not want others to endure the hardships that they did. Participants offered suggestions which they believe could greatly assist current undocumented immigrants. Their suggestions are mentioned below.

Limitations

A limitation of this research is that only one interviewer (who is also the researcher) was used for this research. More interviewers may have possibly allowed for more participants. Another limitation is that all participants had a contact in the U.S. when they first arrived. If this research were replicated with participants who have no contacts, results may vary. Likewise, results may vary if this research is replicated with persons who are currently undocumented. This research is highly dependent on participants' recollection of past events and feelings.

1. The New Bedford Raid occurred on March 6, 2007 when "300 ICE [Immigration and Customs Enforcement] agents and other law enforcement officers raid[ed] the Michael Bianco Inc. factory on the New Bedford waterfront.... At least 300 workers who cannot prove they [were] in the country legally [were] detained. After initial screening at the factory in New Bedford, most of the workers [were] transferred to Fort Devens in Ayer for processing" (The Boston Globe, 2007).

Another limitation to this research is that one participant was undocumented while living in New York. It is possible then that her experiences are based on different policies and practices than those in Massachusetts. Similarly, this research has a wide range of time periods of participants' years of residency and legal status in the U.S. For example, one participant has resided in the U.S. since 2000, and another has resided since 1981. Attitudes, policies and practices changed over time and may affect their experiences.

One limitation of using the snowball sampling technique is that the research lacks a representative sample of undocumented immigrants living in Massachusetts. If, for example, more undocumented immigrant men reside in Massachusetts than women, this research does not reflect that since more women were interviewed. This is also true for other areas such as the age, the income, ethnicity, period of residency in the US, and national origin. However, given that the research seeks information from a vulnerable population and participation in research may be avoided by many, the researcher used whoever was readily available. Consequently, selection of participants according to specific variables like sex, ethnicity, and national origins was not practical for this research.

Another limitation of the research is that the researcher speaks primarily English. Although the majority of the participants conducted the interviews in English, a translator was used for a participant who felt more comfortable conveying messages in her native language. Even though using a translator allowed for a bigger and more diverse sample, it is more likely to have misinterpretation of messages. Also, because paying professional translators was not feasible for this project, an adult daughter of the participant translated the interview. Hence, there is a possibility that the participant shared less because her daughter was present. However, it is also possible that she shared more having someone she is comfortable with present.

Using two different interviewing methods may also affect the results of this study. As noted by Monette et al. (2005), "Lack of visual contact eliminates several desirable characteristics of personal interviews. The interviewer cannot supplement responses with observational information, and it is harder to probe effectively without seeing the respondent" (p. 183). Generally, this seemed to be true in this research as persons who were interviewed over the telephone shared less than those who were interviewed in person. Persons interviewed via telephone were also more skeptical of the investigator and asked more questions of the interviewer's cultural and educational background.

Research Implications and Future Research

The results of this research imply that: (i) contrary to the general public's view, undocumented immigrants rarely rely on public assistance. Instead, undocumented immigrants are heavily dependent on family members, friends and themselves to provide for their basic survival needs; (ii) despite highly stressful conditions, undocumented immigrants do not receive mental health services; (iii) undocumented immigrants have stressful experiences and negative emotions as a result of the lack of legal status. Given these findings, possibilities for future research and improved services are discussed below.

Many participants offered suggestions on what social service providers could improve on. For example, many stated that learning the common barriers could provide insight into the social and emotional challenges they face. Policies could then be made accordingly. Another suggestion is providing more outreach to the undocumented population. For example, making information on U.S. lifestyle and cultural practices easily accessible to immigrants is one way of reaching out to the population. Providing this information may also help immigrants learn more of mental health services.

Policies also need to be created to minimize risks to persons of undocumented status. For instance, there is a need for places that would serve as safe places for undocumented immigrants who are abused. As stated above, many undocumented immigrants may shy away from getting help for the fear of being deported. Thus, safe places need to be created to ensure the safety of persons. To reduce risks, national policies also need to be improved to provide for easier immigration. One current bill is the Comprehensive Immigration Reform Act which proposes a "path to citizenship" and legal protection of workers (Coalition for Comprehensive Immigration Reform (CCIR), 2005). Other policies could focus on the reasons people are immigrating. Many of the participants in this research stated that if not for economic or political difficulties in their countries of origin, they would have returned to their native countries. Thus, future policies need to address global trends that are driving people from their native countries. Developed countries such as the US may need to create better international policies geared towards economic advancement for developing countries.

It may be beneficial for future research to improve and build on this current research. As stated earlier, this research is exploratory in nature; thus, results cannot be generalized. Future research may want to use larger samples that are representative of the undocumented population. Also, it is important to note that a specific focus on undocumented immigrants and their mental health conditions should be addressed in future studies.

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